DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 211 877 CG 015 669

AUTHOR Fine, Marvin J.; Holt, Penni
TITLE The Family-School Relationship: A Systems Perspective.
PUB DATE Aug 81
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (89th, Los Angeles, CA, August 24-26, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Children; Elementary Secondary Education; Family Counseling; Family Influence; *Family School Relationship; *Group Dynamics; Psychological Patterns; *Role Perception; School Psychologists; School Role; *Self Concept; Self Congruence; State of the Art Reviews; Student School Relationship; *Systems Approach

ABSTRACT

Children in a family system establish their identities through the interplay of roles and relationships. As they move from home into school, children become a part of another system. Both systems overlap and events in one system may affect the child's behavior in the other system. A systematic understanding of a child's behavior considers the context, the sequence of events, the reaction of others within the system, and the outcome. Viewing the family-school interaction from a systems perspective can lead the therapist to helpful interventions. An initial interview with parents, child, and teachers allows the therapist to observe the child's system in action and to formulate intervention strategies. This initial interview may extend into short-term family counseling involving all parties, or the therapist may choose to consult with teachers and family separately. Although a systemic approach holds promise for school psychologists in relation to family-school collaboration, several issues must be considered: (1) the psychologist's competency to use a systems orientation; (2) resistance to the new approach; (3) the speculative nature of systems orientation and the absence of research supporting its efficacy within the schools; (4) identification of the client system; and (5) the complexity of systems dynamics. (NRB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED211877

THE FAMILY-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP: A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

Marvin J. Fine
University of Kansas

Penni Holt
Lawrence Public Schools

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☒ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Marvin J. Fine

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CG 015669

Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Los Angeles, CA, August, 1981.

THE FAMILY-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP:

A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

Marvin J. Fine
University of Kansas

Penni Holt
Lawrence Public Schools

This paper proposes to examine family-school interaction from a systems perspective with the implicit hypothesis that such a perspective can lead to a variety of helpful interventions. A systems perspective is not without limitations and problems, however, so this paper also intends to highlight a number of issues related to this approach with specific implications for school psychologists.

While attempting to document the ideas presented, this paper remains speculative in nature and is mainly a sharing of the authors' conceptualizing and experimenting with a systems perspective as they function as a mental health consultant and school psychologist.

Systemic Versus Linear Thinking

The traditional models used by school-based professionals to understand the behavior of children have been linear in nature. These models, psychodynamic, phenomenological, and behavioral, typically project "straight line" thinking regarding behavior. For example, a child's aggressive acting-out might be viewed psychodynamically as a reflection of poor impulse control coupled with hostility toward women (i.e. the teacher). Or the child's behavior could be understood from a behavioral viewpoint as being caused

and maintained by reinforcing consequent events. From a phenomenological position we might think in terms of the child having a poor self-concept, perceiving others as threatening, and believing that an aggressive response is required for self protection.

Each of these positions is valid given the logic of the frame of reference, but from a systemic viewpoint, each would miss understanding the child's behavior in the most potentially helpful way; that is, the child as a member of two key systems, home and school. This viewpoint implies a circular process of causality. Each "cause" of behavior is really an effect of a prior cause, and each effect causes a later event. Each member of a system influences the others, and is in turn influenced by those within the system. Each system involves relationship, power, and communication structures. The parts of a system are interconnected and a change in one part of a system affects other parts. There are rules, some explicit, some implicit, within systems that guide behavior. The basic psychological tenet of the purposefulness of behavior holds true in a systems context, but the purposes of the behavior may not be readily apparent.

As the sequence of events occurs in a system, behavior plays itself out and can be understood contextually. For example, in a family, mother and father began to argue. Eight-year-old Susy dropped a dish, breaking it. Both parents turned on Susy, berating her for her clumsiness. Susy "talked back", further angering the parents who then punished her with a spanking. She tearfully ran to her room, sobbing that no one loved her. A systematic understanding of Susy's behavior would have to consider the context, the sequence of events, the reaction of others within the system and the outcome.

In this case, we would hypothesize that Susy's behavior served the purpose of distracting the parents from their conflict. Susy offered herself as a scapegoat to keep the parents from arguing. The consequences for Susy of being spanked and scolded were less severe than the prospect of parental discord escalating to a point of their separating. The parents' conflict was temporarily forgotten as they unified to discipline their daughter.

Children grow up in a family system and establish who they are through the interplay of roles and relationships. They move from the home into school and become a part of another system. The two systems overlap or interface and what occurs in one system is likely to affect the child's behavior in another system.

In one case, a child was seen as an aggressive bully in school. He was quick to anger and reacted physically to disagreement with other children. A home study revealed a very physical, paternal family. The "pecking" order among the several children was established by fighting ability, and the father set the example and condoned the behavior. The child's in-school aggressive behavior was more than modeling; it was an expression of his view of how people were to relate, how they established contact and how they achieved status. To not act-out physically at school was to violate the valued behavior pattern of the family system.

In another case, a teacher was concerned because a child refused to turn in his assignments and was falling behind academically. The child, Billy, had not responded to teacher encouragement or reprimands. A behavior modification program brought some short-term improvement, but then Billy returned to the old pattern. The parents at a conference shared their own

frustration with the child. He had "always" been difficult, in contrast to their younger child Jack, who was a model child and pupil.

A home study revealed an unplanned pregnancy and Billy being experienced as intrusive in the family. He upset mother's plan to attend college and was a financial burden. The second child born a year and a half later was planned, the family financial situation was better, and mother had given up her college ambitions. The two children were raised in two different but overlapping environments. Billy took on the "bad child" role to fulfill parental expectations. The younger child took on the "model child" role. The children played their roles off each other with the collusion of the parents. The school problems experienced by Billy were his attempts to extend his old role into the new system.

Billy's teacher, feeling harried by the demands of her students, tended to sort children into "good" and "bad" categories. It was relatively easy for her to respond to Billy's behavior by categorizing him a "bad" child and to respond punitively. For Billy, his roles in the two systems, home and school, were now consistent.

Contemporary theorists have stressed different aspects of the family system. Minuchin and Fishman (1981) looked to the structure of relationships, family subsystems and boundaries. Bowen (1978) has been concerned with the individual's differentiation of self within the family. Triangulation was seen as a symptom producer as persons became enmeshed with each other. Other theorists have stressed communication patterns. (Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch, 1974; Satir, 1971; Bandler, Grinder, and Satir, 1976). Indeed our use of language does define behavior. "For example, if we say a child <u>is</u> angry, this implies the anger resides within. If we say a child <u>acts</u> angrily, this allows for a more interactional view and implies a focus

on the effects of those actions on others with the behavioral field (McDaniel, 1981, p. 216).

Intervention From A Systems Perspective

While specific intervention strategies will vary depending on the situation, a systems intervention first begins with conceptualizing the problem systemically. How the therapist conceptualizes the "problem" will influence his/her perception of relevent variables, the kinds of data that get analyzed, and how the therapist proceeds (Haley, 1976; Madanes, 1981). A systems approach is oriented toward the collection of experientially-based data; the systems focused person wants to see people interacting since behaviors are defined contextually. Therefore, an important vehicle for observing the child's system in action would be an initial interview with the parents, child and involved school persons (Aponte, 1976; Friedman, 1969).

Intervention is viewed by many family therapists as "strategic" in nature. The therapist has some ideas on where and how the family needs to change and interventions are caluculated to promote those changes (Madanes, 1981; Hales, 1980). The strategy of calling together the involved school persons, the parents and even the child can be a formidable task for the school psychologist. Parents are used to meeting with only one teacher and it is often just the mother who goes to school. Teachers are not used to meeting with parents and the child. The child is not used to attending a meeting where things are actually discussed.

Initial Interview

As people are asked to express their viewpoint on the "problem" and subsequently interact with each other, a number of elements can reveal themselves.

Who holds power at home and school?

What roles does the child play in each setting?

What triangulation of relationships exists in each setting?

How rigid are the two systems?

How enmeshed or disengaged is the family?

How are different people affected by the child's behavior?

How is the family system maintained?

Who loses and gains what if the child changes?

By observing family members interacting, the school psychologist is able to formulate tentative hypotheses regarding family dynamics that become the rationale for intervention strategies. Specific strategies emerge almost as experimental probes. As the school psychologist interacts he observes reactions, evaluates them in light of his hypotheses, confirms original or formulates new hypotheses, and then continues to implement strategies. Such an approach requires creativity and ingenuity on the part of the psychologist.

Some common techniques described in the family therapy literature and applicable to such a meeting are; rearranging seating as an aide to realigning relationships, reframing the "problem" or a behavior, the use of paradox, and the giving of directives. The "taking of sides" (Zuk, 1968), considered taboo in many other intervention modes, is available as a strategy. The concept of "joining" is also important as the school psychologist attempts to move into the respective systems and then operate as an "insider" rather than an interloper (Minuchin, 1978).

The initial interview may extend into short term family counseling involving all the parties (Fine & Pitts, 1980). Or from the initial session the psychologist may choose to consult with the teacher(s) or family separately.

Short Term Family Counseling

The focus initially is on the child defined as having the problem, but gradually shifts to include the situation the child is in. The content of the meetings would include sharing of events but would avoid "head trips" in terms of elaborate psychological formulations or attempts at imparting insight.

For example, in the case of 15-year-old Gregg, the first family meeting disclosed a grandfather who had taken the father's place as "man of the family" while the father was in the service. When Gregg would be expelled for one of his many episodes at school, he would accompany the grandfather on his trash route and dump explorations. His mother had stepped out of her parenting role and back into a "little girl" role with her father and was exerting very little control over Gregg. She expressed feelings of rejection by her husband who was gone and she supported her father as the main family authority. Grandfather did not like school any better now than when he dropped out in the 7th grade and he was explicitly supporting his grandsons's disruptive school behavior and rebellious attitude.

The psychologist felt it vital to win over grandfather since he was the power in the family. To this end, Grandfather's behavior and attitude were reframed in a positive light. He was identified as a caring, concerned parent who wanted the best for his grandson. It would have been easy to identify him as a saboteur of his grandson's schooling, but to no useful end. The grandfather agreed with the reframed definition of his behavior and also agreed with how demanding a task it was. This presented the opportunity to explore ways that his daughter, Gregg's mother, could share some of the load. As she assumed more parenting responsibilities, the grandfather became less protective and manipulative with Gregg and Gregg's school behavior improved.

The goals of such a series of sessions will probably be limited to the obvious dysfunctional aspects of the involved systems. If more is needed then a referral of the family to a longer-term and more intensive treatment facility (i.e., mental health center) would be appropriate.

Teacher Consultation

"School days, school days; good old fashioned rule days." Schools are a rule oriented system with many pigeon holes that students get placed in. Teachers themselves may become so rooted in the system that they see students in stereotyped ways, "good", "bad", "achiever", "nuisance", "pathetic".

Teacher consultation can assist the teacher in shifting classroom patterns as needed, in seeing the child's behavior in a different light, and in setting realistic goals. The teacher may also need assistance on how to relate productively with parents. Interestingly, many resource materials on parent-teacher conferences will offer the teacher some "survival strategies", but little conceptualization regarding positive parent conferencing. Consequently, parents also get pigeon holed as "uncooperative", "argumentative", "disinterested", "a yeller", etc. Rather than just using "splinter" strategies such as, "let the angry parent ventilate", the teacher, through consultation in systems concepts can be taught some skills around gathering important family data, reframing behavior in a positive light, and "joining" the family system.

What becomes a delicate balance for the psychologist is viewing the teacher as part of the client system (i.e., the child in interaction with classroom variables, including the teacher) and also working with the teacher as a competent professional colleague.

Some Issues and Cautions

A systemic viewpoint holds much promise for school psychologists in relation to family-school collaboration. Family therapy is the current therapeutic vogue, with many publications and training programs emerging, but there are some issues and cautions for the school-based mental health practitioner.

(1) There is a basic competency issue. Many persons were trained in a linear, individual psychology model, be it behavioral, psychodynamic or phenomenological. These orientations become second nature, spontaneous ways of seeing behavior. Just because a systems orientation makes sense and a person chooses to approach a case from a systems viewpoint does not mean it will happen. The techniques are sophisticated and quite dynamic. With all due respect to a behavioral approach, there is a considerable lock-step, rote set of procedures to follow. This is less the case with a systems orientation.

Training, practice, supervision and feedback seem important if school psychologists are to effectively utilize a systems orientation.

(2) Systems have a homeostatic quality--they resist change in order to maintain a previously established balance. If a school psychologist has been type-cast as a tester or teacher consultant and now attempts to take on a broader role, there may be resistence to this from within the system. The resistence could come from others who believe they have established themselves as "parent consultants" or from administrative persons who judge the psychologist's success on quantifiable criteria such as number of children tested. Resistence could also come from teachers who would rather not attend meetings with parents but would prefer to get test data or specific advice from the psychologist.

Whatever the source of resistence, the point is that when a professional person in the system attempts to change roles, someone is likely to get concerned. As with all systems, the homeostatic tendency will become evident. This needs to be understood and recognized as a factor which could prevent the psychologist from developing and acting out a family orientation.

(3) It was stated earlier that what is being presented is considered speculative. There is an absence of data-based research supporting the efficacy of a systems approach within the schools. Whatever the compelling logic to some persons of the worthwhileness of this orientation, there is very little published on the results of using a systems orientation.

Two recent education journals devoted almost exclusively to working with families probably are reflective of the state of the art. Elementary School Guidance and Counseling, February, 1981 (vol. 15) and The School Counselor, January, 1981 (vol. 28) presented several excellent papers on school counselors and family therapy. But not one of the articles was of a research nature; they all were essentially descriptors of how systems theory could be applied in the schools. The need for applied research in school settings is urgent if a family systems viewpoint is not to gravitate to the level of a fad.

(4) Also, as stated earlier, a potential problem for the school psychologist rests with the identification of the client system. From a more traditional mental health consultation position (Caplan, 1970), the consultant is quite unobtrusive. The client , i.e., the child with a problem, is seen as the responsibility of the consultee, the teacher. The consultee's problem is potentially one of lack of knowledge, skill, confidence or objectivity, and the consultant is cautioned by Caplan (1970) to avoid becoming a therapist or supervisor.

When the school psychologist views the client system as the child in interaction with the teacher and the classroom environment, then the consultative relationship is likely to change.

The techniques that the psychologist might use of a paradoxical or reframing nature or the use of specific directives, cast the relationship with the teacher in a different light. This is potentially a professional ethics issue in terms of the indirectness or manipulativeness of the relationship and needs to be thought through by each practitioner.

(5) While there are some guidelines that a person can assume when intervening from a systemic approach, the interventions are much less routinized than from other theoretical frameworks. The complexity of systems dynamics and the resistence of systems to change, require that the person attempting to intervene utilize some creative, at times dramatic, and at times quite manipulative interventions. There is also considerable less emphasis on insight; therefore, explanations of what is happening as an attempt to enlighten people about their patterns of behavior is considered to be less useful than in other intervention systems. Not every professional person is prepared by temperament or their personal/professional guidelines to utilize this orientation to intervention.

Summary, Conclusions and Implications

The thesis of this paper was that a systems point of view allows the psychologist an enriched perception of the child and his situation. Rather than focusing in a linear way in terms of what motivates the child from within, or what reinforcers exist in the environment, a systemic viewpoint considers the relationships of the child to home and school in a more holistic way. This allows for the involvement of the family as collaborators, but

in a way that considers a child's school problems as reflections of family dynamics. The not infrequent antagonism between home and school is recognized and a joining technique may need to be utilized by the skilled school psychologist in order to reduce the threat felt by the family and to maintain the family as a partner in working through the problem situation. The systems approach requires some action and directiveness on the part of the school psychologist during a family-school meeting. Some of the occuring explanations and interventions may seem a little convoluted from a more psychodynamic viewpoint. For example, the techniques of reframing someone's behavior and then utilizing paradoxical instructions may strike some as unnecessarily complicated, confusing and manipulative. However, from a systemic view, the increasing of insight by the various participants in the situation is less important than the realigning of systemic variables to support more appropriate bahavior.

There are many problems associated with a systemic approach and it seems to be in its infancy in terms of applications within the school system. As of this time, there is virtually no research available supporting the efficacy of this approach in the schools, and the advocates of a systemic viewpoint seem to be basing their fervor on their belief and intuition as to its value. The practitioner in the school should not ignore the possibilities of a systemic approach, but should investigate th oughly and cautiously its merits as a potentially useful approach in dealing with children's problems.

References

Aponte, H. The family-school interview: An ecostructural approach. Family Process.

Bandler, R., Grinder, J., and Satir, V. Changing With Families. Palo Alto, Calif.: Science and Behavior Books, 1976.

Bowen, M. Family Therapy in Clinical Practice. New York: Jason Aronson, 1978.

Caplan, G. The Theory and Practice Of Mental Health Consultation. New York: Basic Books, 1970.

Fine, M., and Pitts, R. Intervention with underachieving gifted children: Rationale and strategies. Gifted Child Quarterly. 1980, 24, 51-55.

Friedman, R. A structured family interview in the assessment of school learning disorders. Psychology in the Schools, 1969, 6, 162-171.

Haley, J. Leaving Home. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980.

Madanes, C. Strategic Family Therapy. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981.

McDaniel, S. Treating school problems in family therapy. Elementary School Guidance and Couseling, 1981, 15, 214-222.

Minuchin, S., and Fishman, H. Family Therapy Techniques, Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1981.

Satir, V. Peoplemaking. Palo Alto, Calif.: Science and Behavior Books, 1971.

Watzlawick, P., Weakland, J., and Fisch, R. Change. New York: Norton, 1974.

Zuk, G. The side-taking function in family therapy. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 1968, 38, 553-559.